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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: UPSURGE IN NEGATIVE MEDIA COVERAGE OF
NONTRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS

REF: Astana 113

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1. (SBU) Summary: Several media outlets in the last month have published or broadcast stories critical of religious groups not traditional to Kazakhstan, such as evangelical Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, and Hare Krishnas, depicting them as dangerous sects harmful to society. The stories are consistent with warnings found in the recently-adopted state program on religion and with President Nazarbayev's January 17 speech criticizing foreign missionaries and religious radicalism. Almaty Helsinki Committee chairperson Ninel Fokina claims the media stories were ordered and paid for by the government and are designed to help lay the groundwork for amendments to the religion law. End summary.

MINORITY RELIGIOUS GROUPS FACE NEGATIVE MEDIA BLITZ

2. (U) In recent weeks, there have been a spate of hostile stories in the Kazakhstani media regarding non-traditional religious groups. On February 15, the national Express-K newspaper published an article entitled "Sect in the City," featuring an interview with a Committee for National Security (KNB) agent involved in combating religious extremism. The article declared that "[p]ractically any insane person in our country can get his religious group registered and proclaim himself a Messiah, Superman, or God's envoy," and criticized weak national legislation allowing "religious swindlers" to operate in the country. The KNB agent, identified only by a pseudonym, spoke extensively about the dangers of sects and how they compel members to give up their property, become distant from their families, and renounce their historical beliefs. He also stated that in some cases, foreign intelligence agents work undercover as religious missionaries.

3. (U) The agent specifically criticized the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, and Hare Krishnas, and claimed that these groups run big industrial and financial empires and aspire to obtain power over the whole world. He further explained that new Christian and Buddhist organizations are as dangerous to Kazakhstan as Islamic extremists, as adherents of these groups lose everything, turn away from society, can no longer be trusted to serve in the army or do responsible work, and will ultimately blow themselves up like Al-Qaeda suicide bombers if called upon to do so by their sect. He rejected criticism by human rights activists that the KNB infringes on religious freedom, and said that such opinions were "paid for by bourgeoisie grants exclusively." Finally, he urged parents to call the authorities if they or their children are being threatened by a sect.

14. (U) On February 17, government-owned Kazakhstan TV broadcast a story about the threat facing Kazakhstan from various religious teachings and sects, mostly from abroad. The reporter quoted President Nazarbayev's January 17 speech in which he warned that Kazakhstan should not become a "garbage heap" for religious groups (reftel), and said that many groups which have no support in their own countries were finding haven in a tolerant Kazakhstan. The broadcast featured an interview with a husband who claimed he was unable to free his wife from the influence of the Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as an interview with a prison official complaining about churches like the New Life Church sending books and other materials to prisoners. The reporter concluded by warning that "destructive and totalitarian sects can operate in Kazakhstan on a legal basis" and that missionaries can lead to the "emergence of religious extremism at any point."

15. (SBU) Fedor Zhitnikov, national chairman of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, told us that a local television station in Semey (East Kazakhstan Oblast) aired a half-hour program about the Jehovah's Witnesses in mid February. According to Zhitnikov, the program attempted to defame the Jehovah's Witnesses, showing several members of the community and then adding negative comments depicting them as extremists. He claimed that the program was initiated by municipal officials.

16. (U) On February 19, independent television Channel 31 broadcast an interview with a woman in Shymkent whose son became a Jehovah's Witness, leading to a serious conflict within the family. The woman claimed that "Western pastors" specifically target disabled people like her son, who is deaf. The broadcast also featured an interview with a religious scholar who criticized unspecified groups for handing out booklets on the street and leading people astray. During the broadcast, officials from the South Kazakhstan Oblast Department of Internal Policy expressed hope that the parliament will pass new religion law amendments this year to better control the situation.

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17. (U) On February 20, the national Liter newspaper published an article critical of the Baptist Council of Churches, the branch of the Baptist church in Kazakhstan that refuses to register with the government as a matter of principle (see the 2007 International Religious Freedom Report for Kazakhstan). According to the article, the Baptists have repeatedly refused to register and continue to meet together illegally, despite warnings from law enforcement officials. The author concludes that the Baptists think "earthly affairs" such as registration with the government are not important.

18. (U) On February 25, the national Megapolis newspaper published an article critical of the Church of Scientology. According to the author, about a dozen Scientology groups are active in Kazakhstan, and some are registered. (Note: According to the Religious Issues Committee in the Ministry of Justice, there were four registered Scientology groups in the country as of April 2007. End note.) The article portrayed the group as pernicious and militant, determined to infiltrate Kazakhstani society and politics and bring church members to power. The author explained that the Scientologists have run into problems in other countries, but were now prepared to "cultivate Kazakhstan's virgin lands."

NEGATIVE COVERAGE LINKED TO GOVERNMENT

19. (SBU) According to Ninel Fokina, chairperson of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, the recent negative media coverage indicates that the government has begun implementing its recently-adopted program for government activities in the religious sphere (reftel). The program warns of the "increasingly active operation of non-traditional religious groups" and lax regulation of missionaries and the dissemination of religious materials. The program also calls for using the media to educate the public about the dangers of religious extremism and destructive sects, including contracting with the media to provide for "a set of on-going columns, TV series,

and radio programs on national and local media on religious freedom issues and prevention of religious extremism." (Note: Government contracting with the media is widespread in Kazakhstan. Government agencies receive budget allocations for media publications and sign contracts with journalists and media outlets to publish stories on themes desired by the agency. End note.)

¶10. (SBU) Fokina contended that the recent spate of negative media coverage was ordered and paid for by the government as part of the program. She said that the pro-government nature of the outlets involved, such as Express-K, Kazakhstan TV, and Megapolis, supports this claim. In addition to educating the public about the purported dangers of these religious groups, she told us she believes the media coverage is part of a larger strategy by the Ministry of Justice to lay the groundwork for amendments to the religion law.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Comment: The timing of the news stories, the consistent themes, and the government program's call for government-contracted media coverage all strongly suggest that these negative news stories are part of a government campaign to combat what it apparently views as religious extremism. The specific identification and criticism of groups such as evangelical Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, and Hare Krishnas raise serious concerns that the authorities are moving to define religious extremism very broadly. Though hundreds of these groups are currently registered and active in Kazakhstan, we believe the Ministry of Justice and other agencies will likely increase the pressure on these groups and continue pushing for more restrictive legislation. End comment.

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